



***“The Tide Taken at the Flood”***



**“King’s Troops Assembled.”**

***The Black Suffrage  
Movement during the Dorr  
Rebellion in the State of  
Rhode Island (1841-1842)***

**By Caleb Troy Horton**

I think that our labors in Rhode Island during this Dorr excitement did more to abolitionise the state than any previous or subsequent work. It was the “tide,” “taken at the flood.” One effect of those labours was to induce the old “Law and Order” party, when it set about making its new constitution, to avoid the narrow folly of the Dorrites, and make a constitution which should not abridge any man’s rights on account of race or colour. Such a constitution was finally adopted.<sup>1</sup>

In his autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, the esteemed Frederick Douglass penned a powerful reflection. He underscored the pivotal role of the Rhode Island African American community and abolitionists in securing a monumental victory for Black civil rights in 1842. This victory was achieved through a state constitution that granted African American males the right to vote. Douglass's reference to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (act 4, scene 3, lines 218-224) when Brutus says to Cassius, “There is a tide in the affairs of men. Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune,” further emphasizes that this enfranchisement was a triumph born from political adversity, shaped by the “labours” of Black men, women, and allies during the Dorr Rebellion—Rhode Island's chartist revolution from 1841 to 1842.

New England is celebrated for its progressive and democratic ethos. Enlightened transcendentalists, romanticists, and abolitionists thrived in this charming and egalitarian region. However, the independent spirit of the devout pilgrims and gentleman farmers who dominated the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries eventually gave way to an industrial age defined by capital, profit, and labor-intensive production. Ironically, Rhode Island, home to Roger Williams—an advocate for religious tolerance and freedom—would become a cradle of inequality, slavery, and anti-democratic principles.

The era of significant transformation began in 1793 when Samuel Slater introduced the factory system by establishing Slater’s Textile in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Over time, profit began to overshadow idealism. Factory owners and landholders took measures to reinforce and

sustain the stark divide between themselves and their laborers. Those in the lowest tiers of society—laborers, immigrants, and especially racial minorities—keenly felt this inequality, a reality that became increasingly pronounced during the 1840s.<sup>4</sup>

Since Rhode Island experienced a consistent rise in industrial power in 1793, a dominant class of property owners maintained a political monopoly over the state. Following Rhode Island's admission to the Union in 1790, some resisted the adoption of a new democratic constitution that aligned with the principles of the United States. Instead, they clung to the remnants of the colonial King's Charter of 1663. By 1841, it was clear that this charter, once suitable for the colonial era, needed to be revised. The “rotten borough” representation plagued the charter, known as the Rhode Island “Landholders' Constitution” by the disenfranchised, which gave the agricultural towns the most political power and representation in the Rhode Island State General Assembly. Such representation needed to be more equitable since urban areas, such as Providence, had the largest populations in the state. Also, under the constitution, no white adult male who did not own \$134 worth of land could vote, which meant in 1840 that more than 60 percent of the state's white adult male population could not vote. It was a severe problem for a state with the largest industrial economy per capita in the Union.<sup>5</sup>

Laboring and artisan-class men were dissatisfied, and in 1840, they created the Rhode Island Suffrage Party (a.k.a. the Rhode Island Suffrage Association). Thomas Dorr, former Rhode Island General Assembly Representative (1834–1837), joined them in 1841 and later led their movement. In July 1841, they held a “People’s Convention” in Newport, Rhode Island, which sought to create a new, more democratic, and representative state constitution called the “People's Constitution.” Notwithstanding the Suffrage Association's decree for male universal suffrage, the convention excluded men of color from participating in the convention, and they

were bitterly denied access after many attempts for arbitration. In the fall and winter of 1841, eligible and non-eligible voters throughout the state participated in drafting the new constitution. The People's Convention held the referendum on the constitution on December 27, 28, and 29, and reassembled on January 12, 1842, to tabulate the results, which favored the new People's Constitution.<sup>6</sup>

The Rhode Island General Assembly attempted to draft a new constitution to take up suffrage reform on their terms with their “Freemen’s Constitution” and convene a convention by February 1842 and a referendum the following month. Some in the legislature realized that their Landholder’s Constitution was archaic, and fearing the popularity of the People’s Constitution, they tried desperately to produce a democratic constitution of their own. In March 1842, eligible voters in Rhode Island did not approve the Freeman's Constitution in a referendum. Instead, despite concerns regarding the legitimacy of its ratification, the People's Constitution secured a majority approval along with Thomas Dorr to be elected governor on April 18, 1841.<sup>7</sup>

Governor King would have none of it, and feeling that their political power was now in jeopardy, King and his party of “Law and Order”—a coalition of Whigs and conservative Democrats—declared martial law on May 4, 1842. An “Act in Relation to Offenses against the Sovereign Power of the State” branded the People’s Constitution and the Rhode Island Suffrage Party as traitors to the state. The “Dorrites” (supporters of the Rhode Island Suffrage Party) referred to this edict as the “Algerine Law.”<sup>8</sup>

No longer able to take power by peaceful means, Thomas Dorr and his followers turned to force. Creating an insurrection, the Dorrites made two unsuccessful attempts to take over the state government—one on May 17, 1842, at the Cranston Street Arsenal in Providence, Rhode Island, and another on June 28, 1842, in Chepachet, Rhode Island, at the Battle of Acote’s Hill.

By the end of the summer of 1842, a state militia of both white and Black men had gathered under the banner of Law and Order to smash the Dorrite insurgency. Thomas Dorr and his supporters were defeated, broken, and arrested.<sup>9</sup>

In the rebellion's aftermath, the legal government of Rhode Island realized they needed to compromise to end hostilities. In November 1842, the Law and Order Party met and drafted a second Freemen's Constitution (a.k.a. the Law and Order Constitution)—which extended universal suffrage to all native adult males—to replace the old Landholder's Constitution (collecting where they had left off previously in March 1842 with their first Freemen's Constitution). Most eligible voters across the state favored enfranchisement, considering the suffrage question for Black males, primarily because African Americans had supported the Law and Order Party during the rebellion. Thus, Black male suffrage was a reality in Rhode Island.<sup>10</sup>

This early victory in African American civil rights was hardly the mark of white charity to oppressed people. Despite Black male enfranchisement in the aftermath of a riotous rebellion, could it be that Black and white relations in the state were improving? Perhaps, but more than likely, it was the wit, guile, and cunning of the Rhode Island African American community during the Ocean State's civil war.

Not that other elements did not contribute to this suffrage victory. Rhode Island always had a great affinity for abolitionism.<sup>11</sup> The state's Quaker and moralist Whig sentiment cannot be ignored as a factor aiding this civil rights victory. Perhaps a more brazen factor was the increasing abhorrence towards Irish immigration in the early 1840s, which had de-stigmatized African Americans as an object of ridicule in the Northeastern urban centers of the United States. Given the small population of the Black community in Rhode Island—with its agency in Providence—during this period of study, compared to the overwhelmingly large influx of Irish

immigrants, whites with nativist dispositions no longer perceived African Americans as a threat that they once were to them.<sup>12</sup>

These are mere subsidiaries of a significant theme. The African American community's voice and struggle for citizenship won them enfranchisement. This essay tells the Rhode Island African American community's narrative and its faculty in Providence during the 1840s by exemplifying the community's struggle as a micro-historical addition to the historiography of African American agency during the antebellum era in the United States.

Robert J. Cottrol, in his monograph *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era*, claims that the antebellum Black community in Providence, Rhode Island, was a local study of a bigger pattern.<sup>13</sup>

Providence did not produce a black newspaper or house a major black essayist. Instead the story of Providence's black community is told by ordinary men who spend their lives struggling to carve out a place for themselves in American society. In many ways the history of free Negroes in Providence is better memorialized by the writings of the ordinary residents with their parochial concerns than it might have had Providence been the home of some of the more illustrious black persons of the antebellum era. The day-to-day concerns, the desire to celebrate relatively minor triumphs, the quest for recognition, led to a home-grown literature that provides an invaluable foundation for those studying everyday black life in antebellum Providence.<sup>14</sup>

Despite their humble beginnings, the events in Rhode Island from 1841 to 1842 and the community's participation in a chartist rebellion in the 1840s United States transformed the community into an anomaly. During this period, the Providence Black community stood out from the rest in uniqueness. The Dorr Rebellion and its impact on the community were quite extraordinary. Their organization in the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, their petition and boycott against the Suffrage Association Party, and their volunteering in the local firefighting companies and militia regiments during the rebellion were perhaps just as revolutionary as the Dorrites' plight for white male suffrage.

Erik J. Chaput and Russell J. DeSimone, in “Strange Bedfellows: The Politics of Race in Antebellum Rhode Island,” agree over the extraordinary circumstances that led to Black male suffrage during the Dorr Rebellion:

This legal triumph, the only instance in antebellum history where blacks regained the franchise after having it revoked, was rooted both in the particular political and economic situations of Providence’s black community and in the Revolutionary rhetoric that was part and parcel of Dorr’s attempt at extralegal reform.<sup>15</sup>

In his monograph, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, historian David Roediger claims that the African American community in Providence was viewed as enemies rather than members of a social compact.<sup>16</sup> The Dorrites viewed them as a handicap to their cause for suffrage; hence, they rejected the African American community from the People’s Convention.

Because of this rejection, the community achieved suffrage in the legal constitution (Law and Order Constitution) of 1842 when they joined the side of the Law and Order Party. Thus, the achievement of Black suffrage came from the benevolence of whites in charge during the drafting of the Law and Order-backed constitution in November 1842. While all this may be true, there is little consideration in the literature of whether the Black community attained suffrage under its autonomous power. The vast volume of African American history typically echoes the usual rhetoric of oppressed and burdened people liberated by circumstantial historical events or by kind white benevolence. Black manhood is the theme relevant to the African American community’s struggle in the Dorr Rebellion. The question of the Black man’s place within the context of the Great Experiment is a vehement inquiry. Manhood conveyed different meanings to different people in the nineteenth century. African American males sought to be model citizens, such as providers, laborers, voters, and respectable legal citizens of their community and country.<sup>17</sup> In 1841, in Rhode Island, African American males were locked in a perpetual state of

social inferiority—a *samsara* of Jim Crow. Despite a growing middle-class African American population, Black males still could not participate in local, state, and national government. Black males still bore the humiliating status of a “boy,” which many of their Southern brethren endured in the slave South. The community would not let this social injustice stand.

### **The Foundation of a Community in Providence**

In 1784, all enslaved people in Rhode Island were poised to become emancipated gradually.<sup>18</sup> By the turn of the century, most African Americans continued the occupations they once held when they were slaves (domestic servants, farmers, and laborers) and continued to depend on the white populace.<sup>19</sup> Since their emancipation in 1784, the African American community took nearly forty years to develop significantly in the city.

By 1820, the formation of a community came to fruition during the construction of the African Union Meeting House Church on Providence’s East Side on Meeting Street. Moses Brown, a devout abolitionist and Quaker, bought the land and donated a small sum to construct the meeting house.<sup>20</sup> The Black community raised \$800 out of the total \$2,200 needed for the congregation.<sup>21</sup> By 1821, the meeting house was finished, and it functioned as both a school for young African American children and a place of worship for the community. Reverend Jacob Perry, a Black man, took on the roles of teacher and preacher.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the construction of the new church, the community remained dispersed throughout the city, settling in areas that offered job opportunities and affordable housing. Some settled on Providence’s East Side, where the meeting house was on Meeting Street and nearby Spring Street. Others settled in the Olney Street-Gaspee Street district and the northwest section of Addison Hollow, Providence.<sup>23</sup> Despite the steady proliferation of the community, where 60 percent of African Americans became heads of households by 1820,<sup>24</sup> racial bigotry ensued,



causing tension.

On October 18, 1824, Providence's first major riot occurred at Addison Hollow, or, as city residents called it, the "Hardscrabble." The Hardscrabble area was an impoverished neighborhood. According to William J. Brown, an African American shoemaker and lifelong resident of Providence during the mid-nineteenth century:<sup>25</sup> "A great many colored people purchased land there, because it was some distance from the town, and hence quite cheap. They put up small houses for themselves and earned their living in various ways."<sup>26</sup> Brown also remarks on the poor, seedy conditions of the impoverished neighborhood, which was more than likely the source of the riot:

A man named Addison built houses, and rented to anyone who would give him his price. As he rented cheap, people of bad character hired of him, and these drew a class of bad men and women, so that the good were continually being molested, having no protection. At last disturbances became so common that they raised a mob, and drove many from their houses, then tore them down, took their furniture—what little they had—carried it to Pawtucket, and sold it at auction.<sup>27</sup>

Brown explains that the neighborhood "drew a class of bad men and women." Class tensions between resentful poor whites and disenfranchised Blacks caused the riot.

On September 21, 1831, a second riot occurred on Olney's Lane in Providence's "Snowtown" neighborhood (believed to have stood at the base of Smith Hill, where the State Capital and the Providence Train Station are located today) and had almost the same catalyst as the Hardscrabble Riot. When drunken sailors paid a visit to a "cookery stand" owned by Richard Johnson, a Black man, the riot began. The stand was located in Olney's Lane's wharf section (located near modern-day Olney Street). The area attracted many Black and white laborers, who profited from selling commodities to sailors arriving at the Port of Providence. The sailors, in their drunken stupor, forced Johnson to defend himself. Johnson shot and killed a sailor during the altercation, which caused an angry mob to vandalize African American homes and businesses

in the district. The riot was thwarted two days later, on the twenty-third of September, when the Providence militia suppressed the mob.<sup>28</sup> The Snowtown Riot, like the Hardscrabble Riot, lacked any deliberate reason other than economic tension. It was a rabble between angry lower-class whites, and African Americans who had little choice to live and work in Hardscrabble and Snowtown were undoubtedly caught in the riot's crosshairs."<sup>29</sup>

With these setbacks, the community prospered well in the years that followed. In 1828, William J. Brown and his friends Samuel Brown and Charles Cozzen formed the Young Men's Union Funds Society. The society raised money to cover funeral expenses and participate in funeral processions for African American families. The community also had its own militia company called the African Greys.<sup>30</sup> William J. Brown recalls their ostentatious uniforms, as "their commander, was dressed to represent an African chief, having on a red pointed cap, and carried an elephant's tusk in his hand." Brown also remarks: "The other officers carry emblems, decked with lemons and oranges, representing the fruits of Africa."<sup>31</sup> Also, in 1836, Reverend John Lewis, a Black minister, formed the Providence Temperance Society<sup>32</sup> and many of its members would galvanize into the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society that year.<sup>33</sup>

By the 1830s, the community had grown significantly. According to a census aggregate recorded for 1840, Rhode Island's "free colored" populace numbered 3,243.<sup>34</sup> In 1790, only 475 African Americans lived in Providence. By 1840, 1,302 Black people were living in the city.<sup>35</sup> Their numbers grew substantially, and by the late 1830s, housing for Black residents in Providence became an issue within the community, and they attempted to buy new property. By 1838, African Americans in Providence owned \$29,000 in real estate and \$1,200 in personal property. By 1840, African Americans owned \$34,000 worth of real estate and \$1,600 in personal property.<sup>36</sup> In 1838, Elleanor Eldridge (born in Warwick, Rhode Island, in March 1784 and died in

1862) was an African and Native American laundress, nurse, and entrepreneur who started a soap business at age 27; she owned 2,000 dollars worth of real estate and rented to Black tenants in Providence.<sup>37</sup> If a Black woman could acquire such property in Rhode Island during the 1830s, despite the considerable adversities of the time, it stands to reason that the community would have the capacity to thrive alongside the white population, particularly within the city.

As the community grew, town officials noticed their increased property ownership. Never was it considered taxing the African American populace because, despite owning property, they did not have the right to vote under the current Landholder's Constitution, nor did anyone believe that the community could own as much property as they did by the 1830s. Regardless, state officials concluded that their property should be taxed. On January 6, 1831, the community called a meeting at the Union Meeting House Church; among those who attended were prominent Providence Black Leaders Chairman George Waterman, Secretary James E. Ellis, George C. Willis, George McCarty,<sup>38</sup> and Alfred Niger<sup>39</sup> as committee members. Their concern was twofold: a fee per annum charged in taxes charged to them without the right to representation and the refusal of the City of Providence to build a public school for children of color; only taxes paid for white children's public education. The Rhode Island General Assembly debated the petition on the floor, but it yielded no results. In January 1841, Alfred Niger and George McCarty submitted a similar petition on behalf of fifteen other African American community leaders to be presented to the General Assembly, which also produced no results.

William J. Brown narrates in his biography:

[The committee] believed taxation and representation went together; they were unwilling to be taxed and not allowed to be represented. Some of the members of the house said it was perfectly right; if the colored people were to be taxed they should be represented. But the members of the house from Newport were bitterly opposed to colored people being represented, saying: "Shall a Nigger be allowed to go to the polls and tie my vote? NO, Mr. Speaker, it can't be. The taxes don't amount to more than forty or fifty dollars; let

them be taken off.” So the taxes were taken off.<sup>40</sup>

The assembly’s decision defeated the community’s cause for citizenship. Even with their growing prosperity, ultimately, racial bigotry ruled the day and tore any hope of enfranchisement by respectable means asunder.

The community’s frustration came to a head. William J. Brown iterates the lack of respect and representation his fellow African Americans received before the Dorr Rebellion: “At that time colored people had little or no protection. It was thought a disgrace to plead a colored man’s cause, or aid in getting his rights as a citizen, or to teach their children in schools.”<sup>41</sup>

Not all was lost. The plight of Brown and the community for “no taxation without representation” was just the organized agency that would win the Black male populace suffrage in the following events.

### **Suffrage Denied**

Under the Rhode Island State Constitution, as it was written in 1840, no white adult male who did not own \$134 worth of land in the state was allowed to vote; this was more than 60 percent of the state’s white adult male population.

In the spring of 1840, working and middle-class white men formed the Rhode Island Suffrage Association to address this inequity. Their preamble demanded that lawmakers cease to make landholding a qualification for voting and that they instate universal suffrage for all adult white males living in Rhode Island. In December of that year, the Association began publishing a weekly newspaper, the *New Age and Constitutional Advocate*, to mobilize its supporters.<sup>42</sup>

In July 1841, the Suffrage Association convened its People’s Convention in Newport, Rhode Island. Convention members sought to draft a new state constitution to replace the old Landholder’s Constitution—inviting white men to the convention. However, there was a catch.

Although Article VI of the Suffrage Association’s preamble stated that “Any American citizen, living in Rhode Island, of the age of twenty-one years, may become a member of this [Rhode Island Suffrage] Association,”<sup>43</sup> on August 28, 1841, when election time came to cast ballots for delegates for another People’s Convention to be held in October 1841, convention members were flabbergasted when African Americans began participating and immediately denied them voting privileges to the convention’s committee proceedings. Despite the poll station warden’s ambivalence towards allowing light-skinned people of color to vote, he ultimately denied Alfred Niger—who petitioned the Rhode Island General Assembly on behalf of the community prior—and any other Black man the right to cast a ballot at a polling station in Providence’s Sixth Ward. The incident caused a firestorm among the community and abolitionist allies.

On September 15, 1841, political commentator Samuel Ames, brother-in-law and vehement opponent of Thomas Dorr, who went by the pen name “Town Born,” tarnished the Suffrage Association’s reputation and wrote the following passage in the *Providence Daily Journal*:

Much fault has been found with the Association by some cavillers, because upon their own principles they do not seem inclined to admit our colored brethren to an equal participation in suffrage. It is said, if “all men are born free and equal,” if “the right to vote be a natural and inalienable right,” if the principles of the revolution and of democratic liberty apply in favor of American citizens generally upon this subject, why does the mere accident of color make a difference?<sup>44</sup>

Ames continues his article by describing how conventioners turned away African Americans:

A scene occurred on Christian Hill, in the city growing out of the exclusion of a respectable colored man from voting at the election of delegates to the People’s Convention, which gave much cause for regret to some of the friends of free suffrage, and which, it seemed to us, might easily have been avoided by a little more caution in the wording of the call on the part of the Association. The call certainly included our colored friends, and in some wards of the city a few of the lighter colored were allowed, there being no objection, to vote.<sup>45</sup>

Town Born’s harangue concludes by addressing the “abolition gentlemen” involved:

But have the abolition gentlemen duly reflected upon all the difficulties of the position in which the Association was placed in this respect? Have they recollected, in their anger, the well known truth, that it is possible to push general principles too far in practice, and hence the axiom, “that there must be exceptions to general truths” and that these, so far from invalidating, rather prove the general rule? Will they allow no policy to this body in its course, but insist upon its riding their hobby so hard as to ride down on it the primary object that gave the Association birth? Do they not know that there are long established and deeply rooted prejudices, even in this city, and especially in the country portion of this State, on the part of many against colored men and against their admission to the rights of citizenship, which it is absolutely necessary should be respected and yielded to, at least for the time?—And will they not, as friends of the great cause, give way until some future and better day, when the colored man, by education and improvement, may have so ameliorated his intellectual and moral condition as to exhibit so plainly the injustice done to him, that no good man can refuse to redress it? Rome was not built in a day, my friends, Wait—wait patiently upon *Providence*, and your time will come.<sup>46</sup>

Although Ames was quick to attack the convention’s unwillingness to allow African Americans to participate, even he was reluctant to allow Blacks the right to citizenship. He favored a “gradual” inclusion of African Americans in a future amendment, given a time when they would have “evolved” enough intellectually to participate in local politics. Ames was mistaken. The African American populace refused to wait any longer. They demanded their enfranchisement.

The community fired back. Two days after the *Providence Daily Journal* published Ames’s editorial, they submitted a rebuttal under the pseudonym “A Friend to Equal Rights:”

Admiring, as I do, the generous enthusiasm of “Town Born” in behalf of the largest liberty, and his patriotic desire to secure for his native city that political ascendancy to which, by her population, wealth, and intelligence, she is fairly entitled, I have observed, with surprise and regret, the efforts which have been made to traduce his motives, and to impair public confidence in his conclusions. The business of those who assail him should not be with his motives, but with his argument.<sup>47</sup>

Skeptical of Ames’s slam against the abolitionists, calling for them to promote the “gradual” inclusion of African Americans into political life, the article deconstructs Ames’s motives and the appeals of the community:

From some of the views expressed by “Town Born,” in his last number, I am compelled to dissent. If I do not misunderstand him, he is disposed, in the accommodation of the unreasonable prejudices of the country, to exclude, even under the new dispensation, the

approach of which he hails with so much delight, our *colored* fellow-citizens from the right to vote and to be elected to office. To be sure, he encourages them with the prospect of redress, at a distant day, when the full blessings of universal suffrage shall come to be felt through-out our borders. In this matter, however, I would submit to no delay, consent to no compromise.— The suffrage movement cannot go back!<sup>48</sup>

After the rebuttal's assault on Ames, the response argues for the People's Convention's grave injustice upon Black civil liberties by claiming "the new constitution should make our colored fellow-citizens the subject of a most offensive and unjust discrimination."<sup>49</sup> The community wanted justice, and the discrimination bestowed on them was repugnant to the cause of the Suffrage Association.

On September 24, 1841, Alfred Niger stirred controversy once again after being rejected for the position of treasurer at the People's Convention, bringing matters to a head. While winning the majority nomination from the convention's executive committee, a minority report nominated and favored a white man named Thomas Greene for treasurer. The conflicting nominations caused discord. The committee member who put Niger on the ballot, whether or not known by Niger,<sup>50</sup> was an anti-Black suffragist named Mr. Field—attempting to root out abolitionist sympathizers. Meeting minutes printed in the *Providence Daily Journal* revealed another anti-Black suffragist chairman named Mr. Russell, supporting Field's ploy, as "he hoped all would vote in this ballot and vote their sentiments, in order that all might know how many 'wolves in sheep's clothing' [abolitionists] were among them."<sup>51</sup> The affair served as a ruse to expose and prevent those who supported Black enfranchisement from participating in the convention. Those in favor of electing Niger were either ignored or backed down, as no record of their vote exists. The subject ended, and Mr. Greene was elected treasurer by a majority vote.<sup>52</sup> The Black community ran out of patience.

On October 8, 1841, Alexander Crummell (see fig. 1), an African American Episcopal

priest, approached Thomas Dorr—a former representative in the Rhode Island General Assembly (1834–1837) who joined the Suffrage Association and later led their movement—with a petition he drafted on behalf of the grievances of the Black community. During the convention, Dorr presented the petition at the Masonic Hall in Providence (located on the third story of the Market House, Market Square), where many participants believed it to be an abolitionist ruse. Dorr assured the convention members that it was “written by Alexander Cromwell [sic] [Crummell], a respectable colored man of this city, of some education, signed by himself and five others, relating to their exclusion from the rights of suffrage, which they feared would be voted by this convention.”<sup>53</sup> Dorr then began reading the petition to the convention and its committee members, addressing it “To the Free Suffrage Convention:”

GENTLEMEN: The remonstrance of the undersigned colored citizens of Rhode Island respectfully represents: That, in the constitution that is proposed to be sent forth by your respected body for adoption, there is one measure inserted, upon which we, as an interested party, beg leave, with deference, to make known our views, and give an expression of our sentiments. We have reference to that proposed article which, in inserting the word “white,” denies all persons of color the use and exercise of the elective franchise.<sup>54</sup>

It was clear to the convention members that the community wanted representation. The following few paragraphs in the petition take it a step further; the community justifies their cause for inclusion in the new People’s Constitution by arguing their nativity to the state:

We protest against it as *unwarrantable*. We affirm that there is nought in the character or condition of the colored people of this State, as a class, which can justify this procedure. We are mostly native-born citizens. We have lent our best strength in the cultivation of the soil, have aided in the development of its resources, and have contributed our part to its wealth and importance.<sup>55</sup>

Arguing for citizenship, the community debated whether it was as nativist and Yankee-born, if not more, than a majority of the people attending the convention. The African American community was not alien to New England culture. Northern free Blacks assimilated themselves into Rhode Island culture much as the oldest of the Anglo-Saxon “Swamp Yankees.”<sup>56</sup> They had been



cultivating in the state for nearly 200 years; their forefathers fought for independence during the American Revolution; they had no relation to African Americans from the South, and they came from a few homogenous Rhode Island families.<sup>57</sup> In their eyes, they deserved the same voting privileges as white native Rhode Islanders. They were citizens:

Is a justification of our disfranchisement sought in our want of Christian character? We point to our churches as our reputation. In our want of intelligence? We refer not merely to the schools supported by the State, for our advantage; but to the private schools, well filled and sustained, and taught by competent teachers of our own people. Is our industry questioned? This day, were there no complexional hindrance, we could present a more than proportionate number of our people, who might immediately, according to the freeholders' qualification, become voters.<sup>58</sup>

The Black community's strength served as a weapon against all dissenting voices. How could one argue against their ability to vote with such potent symbols of citizenship: stable housing, churches, businesses, and schools, amidst the odds of racial discrimination, no less? The community embodied the true spirit of New England—progress. The petition concludes:

We claim, then, that to deprive the colored people of this State of the immunities of citizenship, on account of the color of the skin, (a matter over which they have no control,) is anti-republican; and against such a procedure we enter our solemn protest. As a harm and injury, as destructive in tendency, do we regard this measure; and do therefore remonstrate against it.<sup>59</sup>

The document, titled “Committee in Behalf of the People of Color,” was signed by the following Black leaders: Ichabod Northrup, a laborer living on Cushing Street; Samuel Rodman, a laborer living on Union Street; James Hazard, a clothes dealer at 49 South Main and 148 North Main Street; George J. Smith, a coachman residing on Power Street; and Ransom Parker living on Congdon Street—all addresses belonging to Providence.<sup>60</sup> Convention members then voted on whether to keep or remove the white-only clause from the People's Constitution.<sup>61</sup>

As the petition argues, the white-only clause remained as a voter qualification in the newly drafted People's Constitution: “Every white male citizen of the United States, of the age

of twenty-one years, who has resided in the state for one year, and in any, town, city, or district of the same for six months, next preceding the election at which he offers to vote, shall be an elector of all officers, who are elected, or may hereafter be made eligible by the People.”<sup>62</sup>

Division in the committee occurred over whether they should remove the word “white” from the constitution on October 5, 1841, a few days before the African American community presented their petition. The debate over the extension of male suffrage came to fruition at a caucus meeting. According to a copy of the meeting minutes published in the *Providence Daily Journal*, Chairman “Dr J[OHN] A. BROWN introduced a resolution declaring that the right of suffrage ought to be extended to colored people.”<sup>63</sup> Chairman “Major N[ATHANIEL] MOWRY” opposed the resolution, “If we let niggers vote they will be elected to office; and a nigger might occupy the chair where your honor sits. A pretty look that would be.”<sup>64</sup> The proponents of African American exclusion refused to discuss it any further and placed the debate aside. On October 7, 1841, it came to light once more. Mr. Atwell opposed discussing the topic, for “He hoped the Convention would not be made an arena for abolition discussion.”<sup>65</sup> Again, as the *Providence Daily Journal* reports, “nothing was decided upon.”<sup>66</sup>

By October 8, 1841, the subject could no longer be ignored when Thomas Dorr read the petition to the convention, and the committee members had to decide. Some members wished to see the word white “stricken out” of the constitution; some members wanted the word to stay. Most members opposed discussing the matter; the debate was voted to continue by thirty-one to twenty-three.<sup>67</sup> Chairman Mr. B[enjamin] Arnold approved striking out the word “white” as a voting qualification in the constitution. He claimed that the Suffrage Association's original preamble included all adult male citizens in its cause for universal suffrage; therefore, allowing the white-only clause to stand would be abhorrent to the cause of their movement. Arnold was

“interrupted by a gentleman from Smithfield,” who alluded that Arnold was an abolitionist by claiming he spoke for a “different body.” Still, the committee concluded he was “out of order” and allowed him to continue speaking. He defended himself: “He did not appear here as an Abolitionist, but as an advocate of human rights. He was for rights and justice and freedom, and he joined the suffrage cause because he thought these were the great causes of that movement.”<sup>68</sup>

The secretary further reported:

He [Arnold] was glad to find the colored people had taken the matter into their own hands, and bring the matter before the Convention. This was the first intimation he had of their doing so, and they came here just as the report was to be acted upon, just as they were disenfranchised and would have no hope.<sup>69</sup>

Chairman Col. [Samuel H.] Wales presented a new question in the community’s defense: “Did they choose their complexion when they came into the world? They were brought into existence arbitrarily, and ought not to be classed among criminals and malefactors as unworthy the right of suffrage. It was enough for him that they were men, and American citizens.”<sup>70</sup> Even Thomas

Dorr, the president of the committee, agreed to have the clause removed:

The Convention would be [inconsistent] with their former declarations, with their bill of rights just adopted, and would diverge from the great principles acted out by Roger Williams. He [Dorr] alluded to the colored soldiers of the revolution, their bravery and patriotism. He instanced slave States which had admitted all free men to the right of voting. Mr. Dorr concluded by some eloquent remarks upon the great principles involved in this question.<sup>71</sup>

Committee member Mr. Welcome B. Sayles suggested that “it was endangering the whole project to strike out this word, and might prevent the adoption of a republican constitution in this state. It was endangering the rights of 15000 white men.”<sup>72</sup> His comment brought great applause from members of the convention. A vote was then called on convention members to keep or remove the white-only clause from the People’s Constitution; eighteen were for removing it, and forty-six were for keeping it.<sup>73</sup>

Dorr, genuinely sympathetic to the community's struggles, failed to persuade the convention members to remove the white-only clause. He sought to appease the African American and abolitionist community by introducing Article 1, Section 14 into the People's Constitution, guaranteeing fair trials for fugitive slaves. This clause stated, "Any person in this State who may be claimed to be held to labor or service under the laws of any other State, territory, or District shall be entitled to a jury trial to ascertain the validity of such a claim." Additionally, Dorr aimed to encourage patience within the Black community by including a provision that stipulated the white-only clause would be revisited. Specifically, it mandated that in the first election following the establishment of the People's Government, the issue would be presented to voters as a referendum, allowing them to decide its fate. Unfortunately for Dorr, these efforts would ultimately prove fruitless, neither winning the Black community nor abolitionist allies' favor and ultimately alienating support from the federal government for the Suffrage Association's cause (see fig 3).

Meanwhile, in February 1842, the state legislature's convention was trying to draft their Freeman's Constitution. They attempted to revise the old Landholder's Constitution by removing the rotten borough representation and lifting the \$134 property-owning qualification for native-born white men. Between March 21–23, 1842, the Freeman's Constitution was rejected by voters by a narrow margin of votes. Secretary Henry Bowen wrote: "By a small majority (676) the Constitution has been rejected. We have no doubt many voted against it because of their attachment to the freehold qualification. Some voted against it because colored people were not placed on the same platform with white men."<sup>74</sup>

For the time being, the community was without political representation. "Town Born" (Samuel Ames) responded to the Black exclusion, among other criticisms, in an address to the

People's Convention on October 4 and published on October 11 in the *Providence Daily Journal*: "You may ride along in the same tram of revolution with us if you please, but alas! It *must be* in the James Crow car!!!"<sup>75</sup> The Suffrage Association had not realized what they had done. They made an enemy out of the African American community, and the community would thwart their rebellion in the events to follow.

### **The Community Fights Back**

Alexander Crummell and the five petitioners were not the only ones fighting for suffrage; they had a formidable ally in the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society. In mid-November 1841, the society agreed to petition for Black suffrage at the People's Convention.<sup>76</sup> On November 11–13, 1841, during its sixth annual meeting at Franklin Hall (located inside the Market House building in Market Square, South Main Street, Providence), participants agreed to petition for the right of African American men to vote at the People's Convention. According to an excerpt printed in the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society's newspaper, the *Suffrage Examiner*:

Never before did this State witness such a gathering of free, independent, and self sacrificing spirits. The farmer and the mechanic, the merchant and the broker, the manufacturer and the operative, the clerk and the teacher, the lawyer and the printer, the priest and the politician, the old and the young, the rich and the poor, male and female, white and colored, bond and freed, of all sects and all parties: all these came up from the extreme parts of the State, and co-operated '*in glorious unity*' for the advancement of our noble enterprise.<sup>77</sup>

Alfred Niger participated, along with abolitionists across the Northeast and members of the American Anti-Slavery Society: William Lloyd Garrison, female abolitionist Abby Kelley,<sup>78</sup> Charles Lenox Remond, and Frederick Douglass, to name a few. The local cause of Black male suffrage united them all. Attendees at the anti-slavery meeting, many of them African Americans, raised over \$1,000 in donations to fund a statewide speaking tour to encourage Rhode Island voters to reject the proposed amendment in the People's Constitution that would

eliminate the right to vote for Black men.<sup>79</sup>

On the twelfth, the Black suffrage question came to a head when John Brown, president of the Suffrage Association who had advocated Black voting at the People's Convention, confronted the abolitionists during their discussions. Brown tried to defend the white-only clause in the People's Constitution by advocating a gradual inclusion of African Americans in a future amendment. William Lloyd Garrison and Douglass, among others, denounced Brown's claims, and the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society officially declared that they would no longer support the Suffrage Association.<sup>80</sup> The *New Age and Constitutional Advocate*, the Suffrage Association's newspaper, slammed the abolitionists for failing to support the People's Constitution. The *Suffrage Examiner*—disavowed the Suffrage Association, printing responding editorials.

In a letter submitted to the *Providence Daily Journal*, George Clarke, Secretary of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, responded to the *New Age and Constitutional Advocate*:

The suffrage party, by the insertion of the word “white” in their Constitution, do in effect declare that the colored man is not a citizen—is not entitled to the rights which other men possess, and in fact, re-enacts and approves the proscription and injustice which has so long been meted out to him. Therefore, they oppose it, and it is well known to the leading men in the Suffrage Party that this is the ground of our opposition. Quite different reasons lead “others” to oppose the “People's Constitution,” and the only object which the “New Age” can hope to gain by making this unfounded assertion, is to prejudice the minds of its readers against Abolitionists. I will add, that this matter would not have been alluded to thus publicly, but for the *specific manner* in which the assertion was made by the organ of the Suffrage party.<sup>81</sup>

Whenever the Society held a meeting, the Dorrites would crash it. On December 13, 1841, the *Providence Daily Journal* reported that an anti-slavery meeting was disrupted by a “number of rowdy boys” at the Town House in Providence—a meeting house once located at present-day 250 Benefit Street, site of the Providence County Courthouse—in which “Abby [Kelley] was full of spunk and did not care a fig for the noise, but told them to make as much disturbance as they

please.”<sup>82</sup> The disturbance most likely came from anti-Black inclusive Suffrage Association supporters, who sent their kids to disturb the meeting’s delegations. A response in the *Providence Daily Journal* further explained the harassment of the anti-slavery meetings:

What kind of men were those of whom Abby Kell[e]y complained, in Woonsocket, Smithfield and Scituate, who became a riotous mob, so as to deprive the Anti Slavery Society of freedom of speech, when discussing one of the articles of the Suffrage Constitution? And what kind of scenes have our Town House witnessed in relation to those who took the liberty to think differently from a majority of their party on this question? “If these things be done in the green tree, what will be done in the dry!”<sup>83</sup>

The *Providence Daily Journal* reported another crashed meeting. This time, the writer demanded justice for the Dorrites’ crime of thwarting free speech:

Have not the Anti-Slavery meetings, held in Scituate, Woonsocket, and even in the city of Providence, been “molested,” merely because some of the speakers had the temerity to treat profanely that sacred instrument, the *Free Suffrage Constitution*? Was there not something approaching to a *Theatrical row*, at the Town House, on *Sunday* evening!—caused by the Free Suffrage men, restraining and molesting an Anti-Slavery meeting? Was not the High Sheriff in attendance upon that occasion, for the purpose of protecting the laws from violation?<sup>84</sup>

The debate came to a lull when the Suffrage Association held its referendum and approved the People’s Constitution on December 29, 1841. In the Spring of 1842, Suffragists across the state elected Thomas Dorr as governor on April 18. Sitting Governor Samuel Ward King refused to recognize it, arguing that the election was illegal.<sup>85</sup> May 4, 1842, Governor King signed into power an “Act in Relation to Offenses against the Sovereign Power of the State,” declaring that it was an act of treason against the State of Rhode Island for anyone to accept the nomination for office or serve in office under any government but the existing government. The Dorrites referred to this edict as the “Algerine Law.”<sup>86</sup> The Suffrage Association’s cause came to a crossroads; if the Suffrage Party could not take power legally, they would take it by force.

The African American community would not support the insurrection. After all the

injustices the community had endured, they fought on the side of Governor King and his Whig and conservative Democrat-affiliated Law and Order Party. On May 19, 1841, Dorr and his followers attempted to take the Cranston Street Arsenal in Providence. The attack initially failed when the Dorrites' old Revolutionary War-era cannon misfired, and they retreated from the battle. After the attack on the arsenal, Governor King called for more volunteers to defeat the Dorrite insurgency. The *Providence Daily Journal* described the scene: "The meetings to form these companies were fully attended by both young and old—men of all professions and pursuits came cheerfully forward and entered their names. We entreat all those who wish to live in *peace and security* to 'go do likewise,' Signed, 'Law and Order.' ”<sup>87</sup> This provided an opportunity for Providence's men to prove their citizenship, and they proved their worth by joining the militia, policing the city, and manning the fire companies during the onset of the rebellion.

Nearly 200 Black men attempted to form two militia companies. They then tried to elect their officers. The first nominee was Thomas Howland; the second was James Hazzard, considered the wealthiest African American in Providence; and last, a man William J. Brown endearingly refers to as Peterson the Barber. Brown does not elaborate on the details of his background other than "He could not boast of money or influence, but had a good education, and thought that he should have the place on that account" to be elected an officer.<sup>88</sup> When he addressed them, Peterson had a peculiar effect on the company. According to Brown:

He [Peterson] said to the assembly, they had better understand what they were about to do, and not be too fast, for colored people had often been deceived. When they were needed, great promises would be made, and when they were through with them, they would be forgotten. He referred to the speech of General Jackson on the banks of Mobile to his colored soldiers. This created such a sensation that they closed without proceeding any farther, and the company broke up, saying they would not organize a separate company, but would offer themselves to the different companies, which they did, and were received.<sup>89</sup>

Peterson was referring to Andrew Jackson's failure to fulfill the promises he made to Black



soldiers who fought with him at the Battle of New Orleans (January 8, 1815). On this note, they agreed that integrating themselves into white regiments would better serve their interests. That way, they could prove themselves just as capable of fulfilling their civic duty as the whites they served with, and it also proved that they could work harmoniously with whites; their plan worked. The *Emancipator and Free American*, an abolitionist newspaper, reported:

[Black men in Rhode Island were] placed in the ranks according to their height and I saw no manifestation of disrespect toward either one of them, by any member of the company, but on the contrary all praised and honored them for their noble devotion to the interest of the great cause of regulated civil liberty which they were now called to defend.<sup>90</sup>

As Governor King gathered his forces, Thomas Dorr and his Suffrage men prepared to defend themselves against their Law and Order Party foes. On June 28, 1842, the Dorrites entrenched themselves on Acote's Hill in Chepachet, Rhode Island. Three thousand five hundred men, including 200 Black volunteers, marched on to attack the Dorrites. Some African Americans volunteered to operate the Providence fire companies while the men were on campaign:

THE COLORED POPULATION of our city, have come forward in the most honorable manner, and taken upon themselves the charge of the fire engines. They have pledged themselves to assist in the protection of property from fire and plunder, while the other inhabitants are engaged in the defense of the state.<sup>91</sup>

Frances Harriet Whipple Green McDougall, in her tract accounting the conflict, *Might and Right*, recalled:

It should not be forgotten, that when the fire engines were left almost without a man to direct them, THE COLORED MEN came forward, and volunteered to take charge of them; and this act, the condition and treatment of the men being considered, was one of the noblest that were developed during the whole controversy.<sup>92</sup>

Shortly after the Battle of Acote's Hill, the Dorrites were defeated and broken. The men of Law and Order seized the day. The Black community's contribution did not go unnoticed; their participation impacted all who supported the Law and Order Party. The *New York Courier and*

*Enquirer* reported:

The colored people of Rhode Island deserve the good opinion and kind feelings of every citizen of the State, for their conduct during the recent troublous times in Providence. They promptly volunteered their services for any duty in which they might be useful in maintaining law and order. Upwards of a hundred of them organized themselves for the purpose of acting as a city guard for the protection of the city, and to extinguish fires, in case of their occurrence, while the citizens were absent on military duty. The fathers of these people were distinguished for their patriotism and bravery in the war of the Revolution, and the Rhode Island colored regiment fought, on one occasion, until half their numbers were slain.—There was not a regiment in the service which did more soldierly duty, or showed itself more devotedly patriotic.<sup>93</sup>

On July 6, 1842, an African American marching band played in a victory parade on Smith's Hill in Providence. The Law and Order soldiers provided them with captured instruments from Acote's Hill.<sup>94</sup> With the rebellion thwarted, the Law and Order Party duly noted the community's service; the Dorrites were not impressed. Following the conflict, a Dorrite approached William J. Brown. He told him that African Americans had made them lose the war. Brown asked him why they retreated from the battle at Acote's Hill, and he responded, "Who do you suppose was going to stay there when the Algerines [a.k.a. Law and Order forces] were coming up with four hundred bull niggers?"<sup>95</sup> Brown's confrontation serves as an example of the prejudice the Black community faced in the subsequent events.

### **Black Male Suffrage Achieved**

By September 1842, Governor King and the Law and Order Party had begun drafting a new state constitution and had picked up where they had left off six months earlier when they attempted to draft the Freeman's Constitution. This time, they could not bar Black participation or ignore the issue of African American suffrage.

The *Providence Daily Journal* reported: "Public sentiment in this city [Providence], is decidedly in favor of admitting colored people to the right of suffrage. We are aware that a prejudice against them exists in some of the country towns, where but few of them live; but it is

to their credit, that here, where they are most numerous, the feeling towards them is most liberal.”<sup>96</sup> Public opinion now commended Black Providence men for their efforts in maintaining “Law and Order,” emphasizing their willingness to offer services to a government that had previously neglected them for decades.<sup>97</sup>

The convention’s meeting minutes report a similar sentiment. On September 15, 1842, committee members debated extending suffrage to Black males with the same qualifications as eligible whites.<sup>98</sup> On September 21, the committee received three petitions signed by 183 people from Providence against a white male-only qualification in the new constitution.<sup>99</sup> On September 29, the committee resolved to exclude the word white as a voting qualification from the new constitution and put the vote to the people on whether it should be inserted, which conventioners passed in a vote of forty-five to fifteen.<sup>100</sup>

The convention ended on November 4, 1842, and it was now up to the people to extend suffrage to Black men. On November 7, 1842, the *Providence Daily Journal* printed a preliminary constitution with a blank space where the word “white” would typically appear as a voting qualification.<sup>101</sup> The *Providence Daily Journal* advertised to the people:

[A] majority of votes in favor of filling said blank with said word *white*, the General Assembly shall cause the blank to be so filled, and the same shall be a part of said constitution in the same manner as if originally inserted therein by this convention. But if there be a majority of votes against filling said blank as aforesaid, the constitution shall be printed without said blank.<sup>102</sup>

Whites were not the only ones to be allowed to vote on this question, for adult Black males could vote on it as well: “all colored persons under the second section of the article on the qualifications of electors, who may vote on the question of the adoption of the constitution, and also on the question of the insertion of the word *white* in said section.”<sup>103</sup> Canvassars had Black ballots kept separate from white ballots; nevertheless, Black voter turnout would help

swing the amendment in their favor.<sup>104</sup>

On November 14, 1842, the General Assembly printed qualifications for eligible voters to adopt the new constitution. Those who were eligible, including African Americans, had to meet the following qualifications:

All native male citizens 21 years and upwards, black or white, *resident* and *registered* as above, and who shall, before or at the time of registry, pay to the clerk or treasurer of the town, the sum of one dollar, or such sum as, together with their taxes, paid shall make one dollar, which sum, *so paid*, shall be appropriated to the support of public schools in the town; proof of such payment to be made by certificate of the clerk or treasurer of the town.<sup>105</sup>

The new constitution granted universal suffrage to all native-born free adult men who could pay a one-dollar poll tax. This tax was better than the \$134 property qualification and more progressive than the old Landholder's Constitution. The *Providence Daily Journal* published a compare-and-contrast article with other state constitutions to prove the liberality of the new state constitution. Whether this was a publicity stunt to ease angry Dorrites is open to interpretation. Regardless, African Americans in New York could not vote unless they held a freehold of \$250 and resided in the state for three years; in New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, and the Southern states, Black men could not vote, and these states had a freehold or tax qualification.<sup>106</sup>

On November 21–23, 1842, the time came for the people of Rhode Island to vote on the new constitution and the amendment to extend Black male suffrage. On November 22, the first votes came in. First, Providence's ballots came in: the First Ward voted seventy-nine for the admittance of Blacks and three against; the Second Ward voted 194 for and nine against; the Third Ward voted 123 for and twenty-two against; the Fourth Ward voted 185 for and two against; the Fifth Ward voted 138 for and eight against; and the Sixth Ward voted ninety-six for and seven against, totaling 815 for and fifty-one against the admittance of Blacks. The county

and city votes went as follows: in Providence, 815 voted for and fifty-one against; North Providence's votes did not come in; Johnston voted fifty-two for and zero against reported; Foster voted thirty-six for and seventy-three against; Scituate voted thirty for and eighty against; Bristol voted 107 for and thirty-four against; Warren voted twenty-eight for and sixty-two against; Barrington voted eleven for and six against; in Newport, Middletown, and Portsmouth it is reported that “nearly all [were] for admitting the blacks”—an aggregate to change for Aquidneck Island by the end of voting. Tiverton voted seventy for and thirteen against; Little Compton voted twenty-three for and two against. In total, 1,072 were for the admission of Blacks, and 324 were against it.<sup>107</sup> The community's polls were holding steady. An anonymous letter printed in the *Providence Daily Journal* kept up enthusiasm:

Shall the word “white” be inserted in the constitution, for the purpose of excluding men of color from the suffrage—yes or no? The freemen of Providence will, I trust, say NO. . . . Let us refuse to say “yes.” Let us all say NO, and thus restore . . . worthy colored men their rights under the old Federal sway.<sup>108</sup> [Signed] No: No: No!<sup>109</sup>

On November 23, the voting gained momentum. Providence's First Ward voted 108 for and four against; the Second Ward voted 237 for and thirteen against; the Third Ward voted 168 for and twenty-four against; the Fourth Ward voted 231 for and three against; the Fifth Ward voted 194 for and eleven against; and the Sixth Ward voted 143 for and ten against—a total in Providence of 1,081 for and 65 against extending suffrage rights to Black males. The town and city ballots went as follows: Providence voted 1,081 for and sixty-five against, North Providence cast ninety-seven votes in favor and three against; Cumberland did not record any votes; Smithfield cast 116 votes in favor and thirty against; Johnston cast fifty-two votes in favor and three against; Cranston cast twenty-six votes in favor and eight against; Foster cast thirty-six votes in favor and seventy-three against; Scituate cast thirty votes in favor and eighty against; Bristol cast twenty-eight votes in favor and sixty-two against; Barrington cast sixteen votes in

favor and eleven against; and Coventry did not report any votes. West Greenwich voted two for and five against; Warwick voted seventy-two for and seventy-seven against; East Greenwich's votes were not recorded; Exeter did not report any votes for the admission of Black men but recorded forty-three votes against it; North Kingstown recorded forty votes in favor and thirty-three against; South Kingstown did not report any votes; Charlestown cast one vote in favor and twenty-three against; Westerly did not report any votes; Tiverton recorded seventy votes in favor and thirteen against; Little Compton recorded twenty-three votes against. The total number of votes (since November 23) tallied to 1,797 for and 565 against.<sup>110</sup>

On November 26, the *Providence Daily Journal* published another nearly complete list of votes by cities and towns, except for a few rural towns that reported later. Providence's total vote was 1,384 for and 109 against; North Providence voted 163 for and eight against; Cumberland voted 199 for and seven against; Smithfield voted 302 for and fifty-four against; Johnston voted 131 for and thirteen against; Cranston voted sixty for and fourteen against; Scituate voted fifty-two for and ninety-eight against; Newport voted 365 for and 235 against; Middletown voted thirty-four for and thirteen against; Portsmouth voted seventy for and twelve against; Tiverton voted one-hundred for and twenty-one against; Warren voted forty-nine for and 119 against; Barrington voted twenty for and seventeen against; Coventry voted 206 for and twenty-one against; West Greenwich voted two for and five against; Warwick voted 111 for and 113 against; East Greenwich voted eighty-eight for and twenty-seven against; North Kingstown voted fifty-three for and seventy-two against; South Kingstown voted fifty-five for and 167 against; Charlestown voted two for and fifty-six against; Westerly voted thirty-two for and sixty-seven against; Exeter voted 126 for and two against.<sup>111</sup> Richmond's votes were recorded later, numbered four for and sixty-five against; Hopkinton's also came in later, numbering thirty-six

for and twenty-seven against. The total number of votes for the admittance of eligible Black males in the constitution was 3,833, and the total number against the admittance of eligible Black males in the constitution was 1,412.<sup>112</sup>

Rhode Island African American men had political faculties; they were now enfranchised. “The vote of the colored people was unanimous for a new constitution,” William J. Brown recalled.<sup>113</sup>

Not all were happy with their political ascension. When William J. Brown went to cast his vote, he was approached by a Suffrage Association supporter who exclaimed: “The Algerines have got the niggers to help them out, and I will not stand it. I think it the duty of every man to come up and help, when niggers are allowed to vote against us.” The angry Dorrite continued his lament by telling Brown that his “wool will grow closer to [his] skull than it does now before [he can] vote again.” Brown ignored him and went about his civic duty.<sup>114</sup>

The community could enjoy the fruits of its labor in May 1843 when the Rhode Island General Assembly enacted the constitution. They fulfilled their civic responsibilities above and beyond the call of duty. Finally, they achieved political agency.

### **The Aftermath**

Eligible Black men’s ballots helped turn the vote for the amendment in their favor; the community had come a long way since its humble beginnings at the turn of the nineteenth century, especially in Providence. The question begs to be answered: how did the community use their agency to achieve their plight for the extension of suffrage, especially when adding contributing factors to this extension?

The Irish were a catalyst for the fruition of Black male suffrage. A large majority of the Suffrage Association’s followers were Irish immigrants.<sup>115</sup> They were the single most significant

threat to political power in New England, especially during the 1840s. During this period, the nativist movement was at its peak. In 1843, the American Party's (a.k.a. "Know Nothings") platform was anti-immigration and anti-Catholic. The last thing they desired was universal suffrage for immigrants. The Dorr Rebellion fueled the fires of nativist hatred for the 23 million immigrants, primarily Irish, that would arrive in the United States through the years of 1845 to 1855.<sup>116</sup> In Rhode Island, the Law and Order Party was politically affiliated with the Whig Party in terms of political power. Many conservative Whigs were sympathetic to or affiliated with the American Party.<sup>117</sup> Factory owners and entrepreneurs voted for Whigs, as their platform promoted cheap labor, strong centralization, internal improvements, and trade tariffs on imports to promote internal growth and the sale of U.S. manufactured goods. Voters predominantly favored Whig candidates in Rhode Island, the most industrialized state in the Union per capita.<sup>118</sup> Extending political power to the Irish and their Suffrage Association affiliates would have dismantled their hegemony over the state.

So, how does this affect the Black community? African Americans no longer became the primary focus of discrimination; the Irish were a new threat. In the *Providence Daily Journal*—a headline titled "Increase of Catholicism in the United States"—warns of the dangers of Catholicism and Irish immigration. Ironically, the article appears alongside an article promoting the liberal policies of the new Law and Order Party Constitution of November 1842 and its respect for the rights of "colored people."<sup>119</sup> U.S. Congressman Elisha Potter wrote in a private letter to Former Rhode Island Governor and U.S. Senator John Brown Francis that Law and Order delegates "would rather have the negroes vote than the damned Irish" (both men were elected to their seats by the Law and Order Party).<sup>120</sup>

This argument is still insufficient to stand alone as the sole reason for Black male



suffrage in Rhode Island. There are too many factors. Bigoted whites would have never compromised by letting Blacks vote so the Irish could not. As previously observed in this essay, old prejudices died hard, such as they did in January 1831 and 1841, when the Rhode Island State Legislature denied enfranchisement to the African American community when ordered to pay taxes. State lawmakers preferred to remove African Americans' taxes rather than allow them to vote. The legal government could have just as quickly voted down an amendment extending Black male suffrage as they had rapidly promoted a natural-born voting qualification in the Law and Order Constitution. They did not, which begs the question: why the change of heart?

The abolitionists played a significant role in achieving Black male suffrage. Historically, the Whig Party divided between “Cotton” (notably those who dealt in textiles produced from slave-picked cotton) and “Conscience” Whigs. The Cotton Whigs included factory and business owners who cared little for African American equality and more for free labor and profit; the Conscience Whigs were abolitionists and intellectuals who believed in universal suffrage and the abolition of enslaved African Americans.<sup>121</sup> The benevolence of guilty whites did not aid the community. It is quite the opposite. The Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, comprising whites and Blacks, collaborated towards the same goal. The *Suffrage Examiner* reported the sentiment during the Sixth Annual Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Convention: “the old and the young, the rich and the poor, male and female, white and colored, bond and freed, of all sects and all parties” were united under the cause of Black liberation.<sup>122</sup> The Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society did indeed align with the Law and Order Party, and most saw themselves as aligned with that Whig establishment.

Despite the Dorrites' bitter claims, the African American community was not used as a political instrument for the Law and Order Party. Frances Harriet Whipple Green McDougall (a

Dorrite), in her tract *Might and Right*, complained that “they took advantage of the situation of the colored population... Without one particle of friendliness towards the colored race,” and “They made colored men voters, not because it was *their right*, but because *they needed their help*.”<sup>123</sup> Given the publication date of the tract, a few years after the Dorr Rebellion in 1844, this interpretation of Black treatment by the Law and Order party is untrue. Frances was a Suffrage Association supporter. After the rebellion, she fled to Connecticut in exile with her husband, so her supposition about the conflict is biased. There is no conclusive evidence that the Law and Order Party ever needed the Black community on their side. As the documentation shows throughout this essay, the Dorrites essentially gave the Black community to the Law and Order Party. Frances mentions little of the Suffrage Association’s immense prejudice towards the community: from the initial rejection of Black participation at the People’s Convention from the firing of Alfred Niger as treasurer, the denial of their petition, the discriminatory meeting minutes printed in the *Providence Daily Journal*, and last but not least, the many occasions when the Dorrites crashed the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Association meetings. Hypocritically, the Suffrage Association was “without one particle of friendliness towards the colored race” (see fig. 2, 2.2, and 2.3). Despite Thomas Dorr’s attempt to include measures to amend the white-only clause in a future referendum and to extend fair trials to run-away slaves, one man's actions could no longer stall and appease the community (see fig. 3).<sup>124</sup> Ultimately, it was the Rhode Island Suffrage Association who were the ones to alienate the community and its abolitionist allies, not the Law and Order Party.

Suppose Black male suffrage did not come about solely because of Irish discrimination, white benevolence, or Law and Order Party manipulation. In that case, it must have come to fruition through the community itself. Several factors contributed to the community's success.

One factor was the community's demographics. Allowing Black males to vote did not threaten the established government of Rhode Island's hegemony over the state; the population was too small. The statistical data shows that the Black population in Providence shrank from a growth rate of 1.7 to 0.25 percent per year between 1850–1860. In 1845, Black males made up 41.4 percent of the total African American population in Providence; comparing that to the 1840 aggregate of 1,302 African Americans living in the city,<sup>125</sup> and the total African American state populace of 3,243 people in 1840—2.98 percent proportion of the total state populace—it was too insubstantial for the legislature to consider denying enfranchisement to Black men in fear of creating a new oppositional voting block.<sup>126</sup>

Regardless of this, it was not all about numbers. The Law and Order Party was genuinely sympathetic to the community's grievances. The press and Law and Order Party members frequently commended the community for their help during the rebellion, as observed throughout this essay. As a result of the deal, the Law and Order Party and their Whig affiliates acquired a new political ally.<sup>127</sup> An editorial in the *Providence Daily Journal* surmised the situation: "Besides, they [African Americans] are not numerous, and, judging from past experience, they will always be friendly to what is termed conservative men and measures. The people in the country have vastly more to fear from the *white* ruffians of Woonsocket and other villages of a similar stamp, than from any number of black voters that may ever come to exist in Rhode Island."<sup>128</sup>

None of the above circumstances stand out more than the African American community's assertiveness. It was they who demanded their voices heard, and it was they who made Black male suffrage a reality. A few years before the rebellion, the community displayed their agency by demanding "no taxation without representation" and petitioning the Rhode Island General

Assembly to expand suffrage. Demanding their inclusion in the People’s Convention, the community published complaints in the *Providence Daily Journal*. Arguing their nativity, citizenship, strong community, and dedication to republican values, the community submitted a petition to the Dorrites at the People’s Convention. The community worked with their abolitionist allies to meet their demands for justice. The community answered Governor King’s call to arms by mustering their able-bodied men to march shoulder to shoulder with their fellow white male citizens and operating the fire fighting companies when the men went off on campaign. Finally, the community showed strength at the polls; eligible Black male votes had tipped the ballot in their favor.

As Douglass remarked, “It was the ‘tide,’ ‘taken at the flood,’ ” evocative of a scene in Shakespeare’s *Julius Ceasar*. In a moment of *carpe diem*, the Rhode Island African American community had restored Black manhood and dignity through the attainment of citizenship—the right to vote; they had seized their day:

There is a tide in the affairs of men.  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.  
On such a full sea are we now afloat,  
And we must take the current when it serves,  
Or lose our ventures.

*Julius Caesar*, act 4, scene 3, lines 218-22

## Appendix

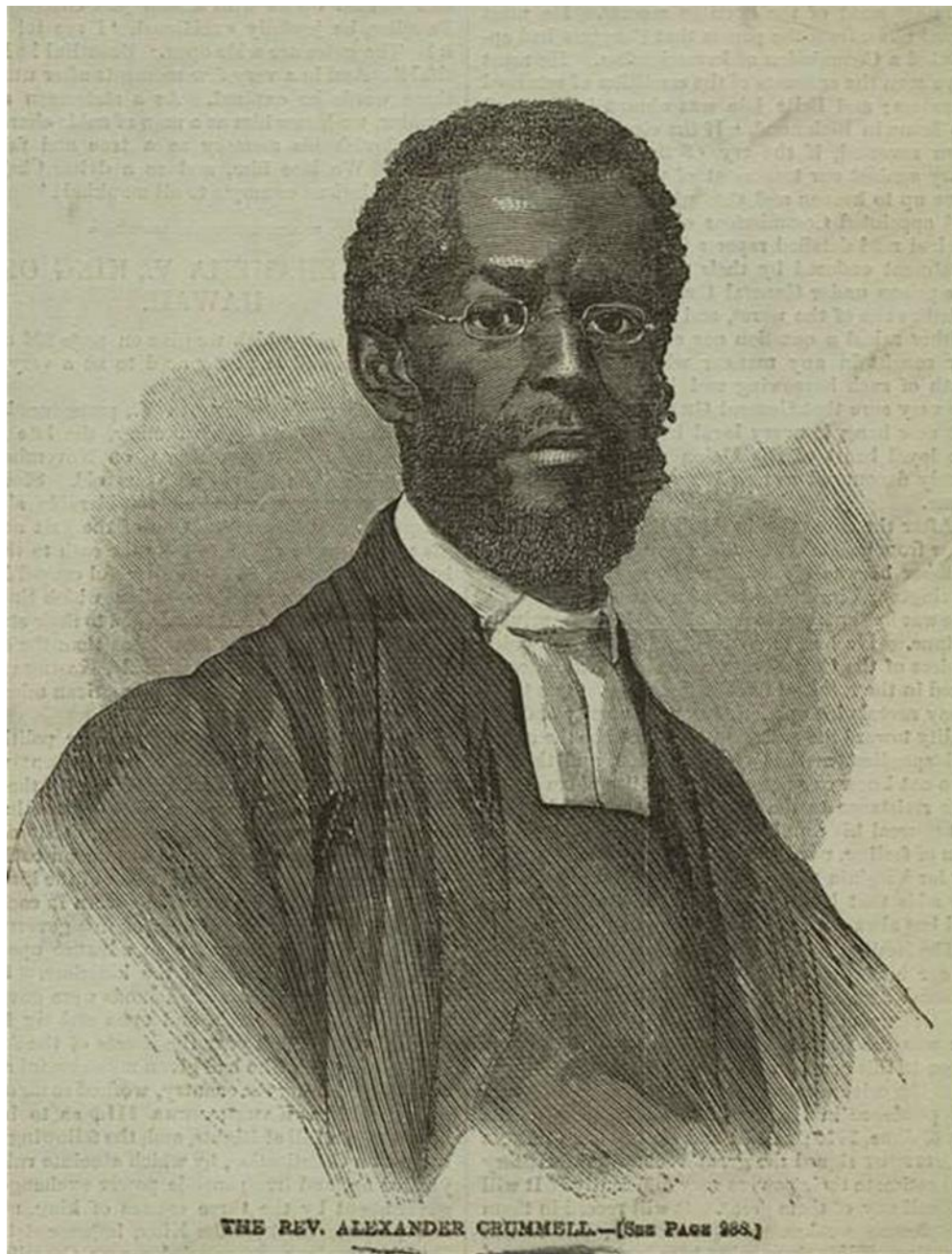
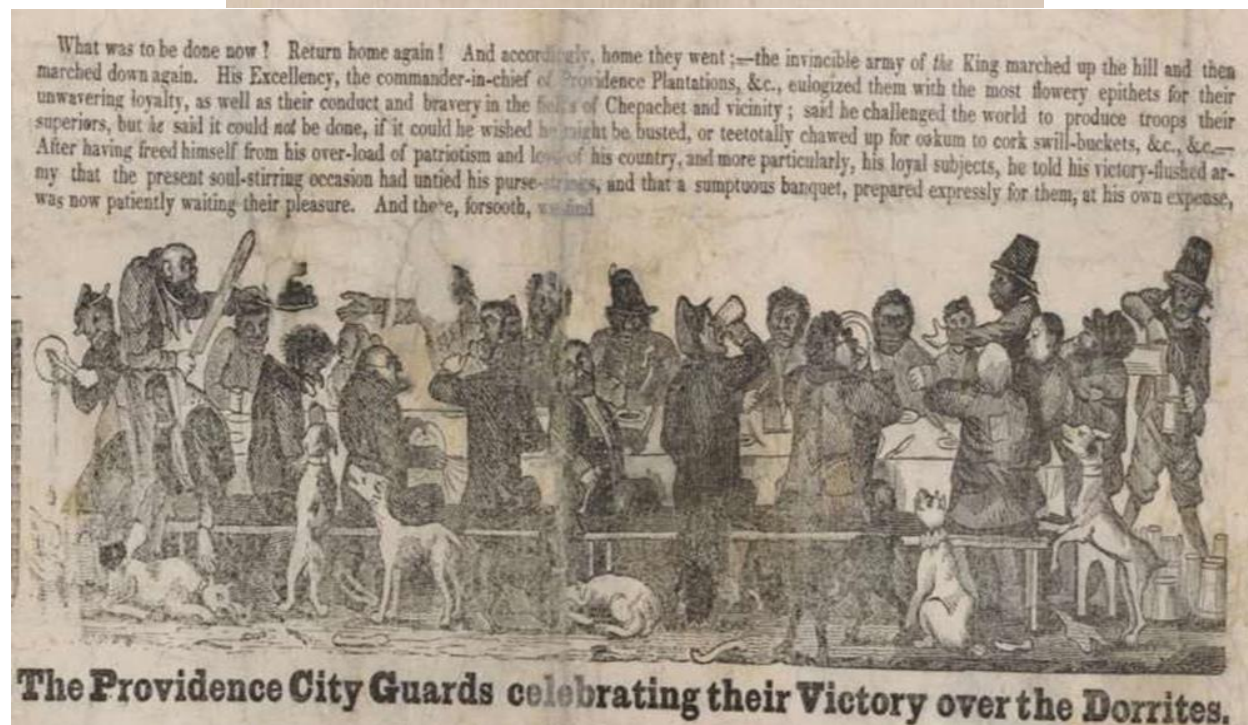
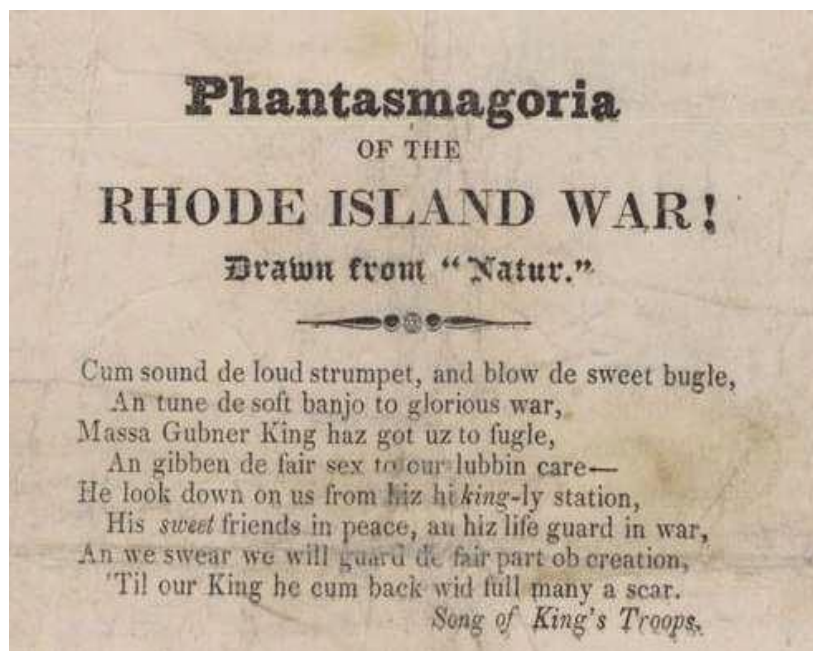


Fig. 1. Alexander Crummell (March 3, 1819–September 10, 1898), an avid abolitionist and proponent of Black nationalism who served the African American Community in Providence. He was an Episcopal minister at Christ Church in Providence and a professor of theology. Crummell helped draft the petition for the “colored community” in Providence to the People’s Convention in October 1842. He claimed he secured the community’s “political rights in Rhode Island,” stating: “the leading colored men communicated their interests to my hand and judgment; and laid upon me the burden of drafting the documents and addresses and of taking the steps which secured in the end their political rights.”<sup>129</sup> Alexander Crummell, in *Harper’s Weekly*, April 4, 1866. Image courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, RI.



Fig. 2.1. This broadside depicts the mustering of Black soldiers who fought on the side of Governor King and the Law and Order Party. A Dorrite propaganda piece, the cartoon resembles a motley group of Southern enslaved individuals, akin to a classic Sambo stereotype. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, RI.



Figs 2.2 and 2.3. The "Song of the King's Troops" is another mockery of the African American militiamen who fought against the Suffrage Association during the rebellion. The song's style is a demeaning minstrel show tune. The image "The Providence City Guards Celebrating their Victory over the Dorrites" depicts Black militiamen, firemen, and city watchmen feasting savagely in celebration. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, RI.

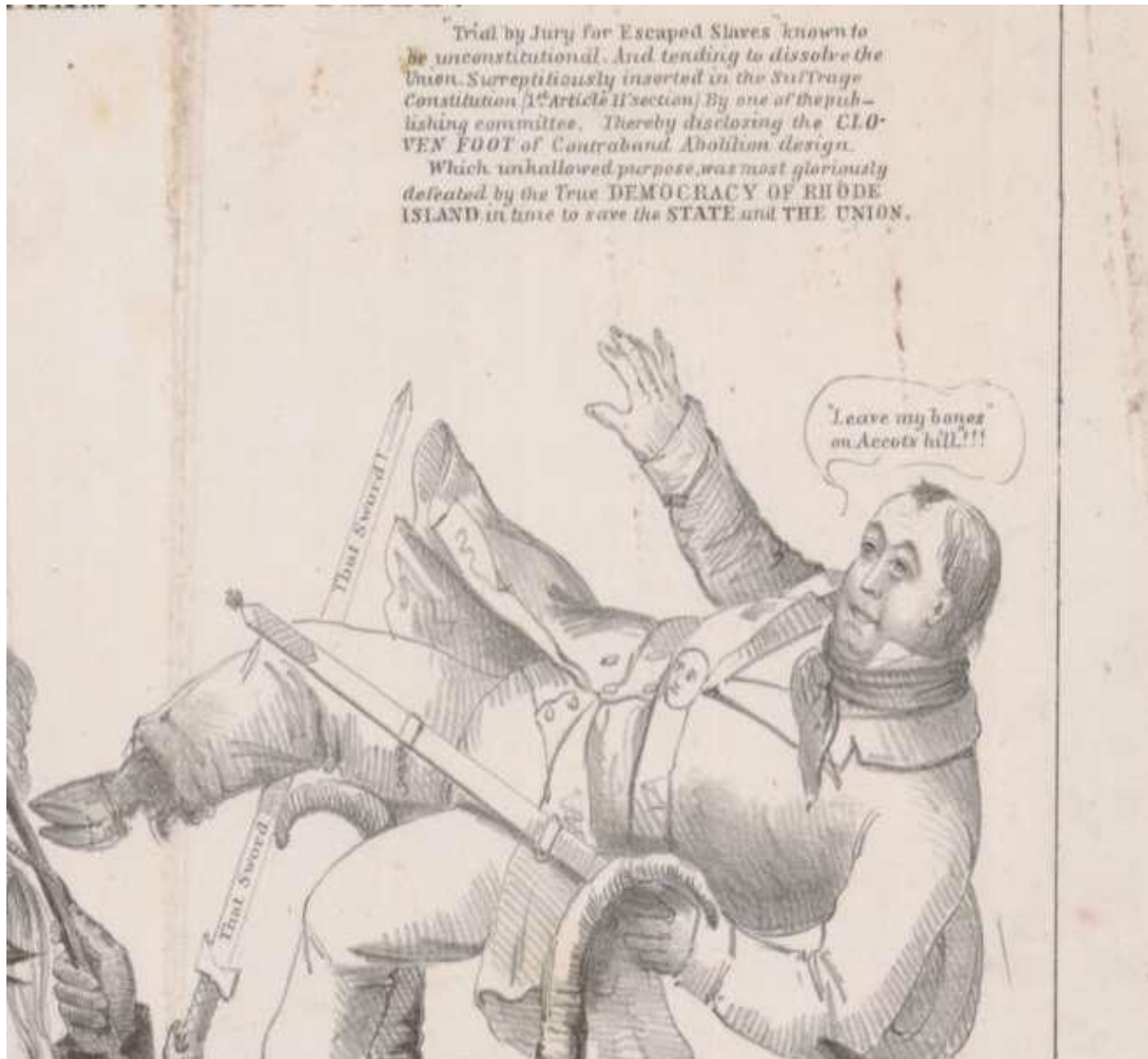


Fig. 3. “Trouble in the Spartan Ranks” is a political cartoon printed shortly after the rebellion’s conclusion. The scene depicting Dorr (top right) is illustrated with the so-called cloven foot of abolitionism, which many, both North and South, believed to be a ruinous group of people that sought to divide the nation. The caption above Dorr refers to jury trials for fugitive slaves stated in Article 1 Section 14 of the People’s Constitution: “Any person in this State, who may be claimed, to be held to labor or service, under laws of any other State, territory, or District, shall be entitled to a jury trial to ascertain the validity of such claim.” Ironically, the insertion of this article into the People’s Constitution did not garner the support of the African American and abolitionist community and simultaneously alienated Dorr from receiving federal support. White Southerners were gripped by an intense fear that Dorr would spread his doctrine of the right of the people to alter or abolish their form of government across the country. They believed that Dorr’s actions would incite slave revolts. This apprehension was so intense that it even alienated any support Dorr could have gained from President John Tyler during the rebellion. Tyler, convinced by Southern legislators like John C. Calhoun and William Preston, saw Dorr as a radical abolitionist whose actions would set a dangerous precedent for all state constitutions and upend the fugitive slave laws of the United States. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, CT: Park Publishing Co., 1882), 274–275.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on New England's transformation into an industrial and capitalist society, see Paul Rivard, *A New Order of Things: How the Textile Industry Transformed New England* (New Hampshire: UPNE, 2002). Rivard's monograph is an excellent study of the development of an economically privileged society in New England during the Industrial Revolution. His emphasis on the social inequities between laborers and factory owners during the mid-nineteenth century is also contextually relevant to the Dorr Rebellion and the laboring class's struggle for equality.

<sup>3</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1986), 117–122.

<sup>4</sup> *Providence Directory, 1841* (Providence: H.H. Brown, 1841), 181–187, Providence City Archives, Providence, RI. The African Americans recorded in the city directory consist of 172 “employed Negroes:” eighty-five are listed as laborers, twenty-seven as Pilot-mariners, fourteen barbers, twenty as draymen, nine small business owners, eight waiters, three clergy, three cooks, three shoemakers, two painters, two gardeners, one engineer, a liveryman, one carpenter, one teacher, two bakers, and one coachman. This directory is not accurate in comparison with the total Black population of the city; however, it does provide enough evidence to surmise that most Black males worked as laborers. Most African Americans in Rhode Island in 1841, even those living in an industrial center like Providence, were at the lowest tier of the economic ladder. Also, the reader may note that none of the occupations listed include Black factory workers. As cited in Rivard's monograph, employers preferred to hire non-landholding whites and immigrant workers, and these workers refused to work alongside Black workers, which left little opportunity for African Americans to pursue careers in the textile industry during the mid-nineteenth century. It is also possible that there were some Black factory workers, but they were miscellaneously filed under the title of “laborer” in the directory.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur M. Mowry, “Chapter VI: The Charter Criticized,” in *The Dorr War: The Constitutional Struggle in Rhode Island* (Providence: E.L. Freeman and Sons Press, 1901), 74–83.

<sup>6</sup> Mowry, “Chapter VI: The Conventions,” 95–106; “Chapter IX: The People's Constitution,” 107–118.

<sup>7</sup> Mowry, “Chapter X: The Freeman's Constitution,” 119–126.

<sup>8</sup> Mowry, “Chapter XI: The Elections,” 128–138.

<sup>9</sup> McLoughlin, *Rhode Island*, 134–135.

<sup>10</sup> For a more thorough synopsis of the Dorr Rebellion, please refer to Patrick T. Conley, *The Dorr Rebellion: Rhode Island's Crisis in Constitutional Government* (Providence: Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation, 1973).

<sup>11</sup> For an authoritative narrative of Rhode Island abolitionism, please refer to Deborah B. Van Broekhoven, *The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Charles Hoffmann and Tess Hoffmann, *Brotherly Love: Murder and the Politics of Prejudice in Nineteenth-Century Rhode Island* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 22. From 1840 through 1854, Providence's Irish population increased exponentially. Irish immigrants made up twenty percent of Providence's population by 1854.

<sup>13</sup> Robert J. Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1982), forward.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>15</sup> Erik J. Chaput and Russell J. DeSimone, "Strange Bedfellows: The Politics of Race in Antebellum Rhode Island," *Common-Place* 10 (2009): 3, accessed November 28, 2010, URL: <http://www.common-place.org/vol-10/no-02/chaput-desimone/>

<sup>16</sup> See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> For more information on theses of conceptualizations of Black manhood in the nineteenth century, please refer to Darlene C. Hine and Earnestine Jenkin, *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity, Vol. 1: "Manhood Rights:" The Construction of Black Male History and Manhood, 1750-1879* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Rhode Island implemented a phased approach to emancipation. Any child born after March 1, 1784, was not allowed to be held in slavery. However, there was uncertainty about the status of children born to mothers who were still enslaved. According to the law, masters had the obligation to provide for these children until they reached the age of 21 for males and 18 for females.

<sup>19</sup> This statistic comes from a graph cited in Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 48.

<sup>20</sup> William J. Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown of Providence, R.I.: With Personal Recollections of Incidents in Rhode Island* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press; Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 2006), 26. William J. Brown refers to Moses Brown's contribution to the construction of a church: "I [Moses Brown] always had it in my heart to help the colored people, whenever I saw they were ready to receive. Now go and select you out a lot, suitable for your purpose, and I will pay for it."

<sup>21</sup> Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 52.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>25</sup> William J. Brown was a shoe cobbler and a lifelong resident of Providence. Born in 1814, he wrote an autobiography in Providence and published it in 1883. His memoir is an invaluable source of information about the daily lives of the Providence Black community in antebellum Rhode Island. His memoir is especially relevant as an eyewitness account of the events that ensued during the Dorr Rebellion (1841-1842). See William J. Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown of Providence, R.I.: With Personal Recollections of Incidents in Rhode Island* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press; Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 50; The original location of Hardscrabble is believed to have stood at the intersection of Smith Street and North Main Street. However, the exact site of Snowtown remains unclear due to historical ambiguities and a lack of detailed maps. It is generally thought that Snowtown was located west of Hardscrabble, across the Blackstone Canal, and beneath Smith Hill. Some suggest that the area now occupied by Waterplace Park and Providence Place may have been the site of Snowtown.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph W. Sullivan, “Reconstructing the Olney’s Lane Riot: Another Look at Race and Class in Jacksonian Rhode Island,” *Rhode Island History Journal* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 49–60.

<sup>29</sup> Historian Joseph W. Sullivan theorizes that the Hardscrabble and Snowtown Riots resulted from class tensions between unskilled laborers and artisans. Although certainly a motivator, it was not solely a race riot against the Black community, as other historians have interpreted. Sullivan’s initial thesis surmises that the riot had more to do with conflicting class interests than prejudice. For more information, please refer to the citation above.

<sup>30</sup> Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 46–47.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>32</sup> Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 62.

<sup>33</sup> *Proceedings of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Convention, Held in Providence, on the 2d, 3d, and 4th of February, 1836* (Providence, RI: H. H. Brown, Printer, 1836).

<sup>34</sup> Edwin M. Snow, *Report Upon the Census of Rhode Island, 1865; with the Statistics of the Population, Agriculture, Fisheries, and Manufactures of the States* (Providence: Providence Press Company, State Printers, 1867), xlv.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, xlv–xlvi.

<sup>36</sup> Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 126.

<sup>37</sup> Elleanor Eldridge, *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* (Providence: B.T. Albro, 1843), 68–69; Born in 1794, Elleanor Eldridge was a free Black woman. She sued to reclaim a house on Spring Street in Providence that was seized from her on account of a \$240 defaulted loan she could not pay due to an illness she contracted, resulting in her temporary inability to work. In 1843, she co-wrote *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*, a biography, with the aid of novelist Frances Harriet Whipple Green McDougall, to raise proceeds for her court battle to recover her property. Ultimately, she settled her case in court and bought back her property.

<sup>38</sup> George Waterman joined the Freewill Baptist Church in 1840, located on Pond Street, Providence, and was an officer of the church. Eventually, he became a deacon: Robert J. Cottrol, ed., *From African to Yankee: Narratives of Slavery and Freedom in Antebellum New England* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1999), 157; When Moses Brown sold the land for the African Union Meeting House, George McCarty was on the initial organizational committee of the African Union Meeting House: Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 58; George C. Willis was a member of the African Union Meeting House and a proponent of the temperance; *Ibid.*, 58 & 69; Willis lived at 43 Benevolent Street. See *Providence Directory, 1841*, 187.

<sup>39</sup> Alfred Niger was born in 1797 in the Old Saybrook area of Connecticut. He moved and worked as a barber in Providence, operating at “87 High, Spring [Street]” (See *Providence Directory, 1841*, 185) from 1824 to his death in 1862. Niger began his career in Black civil rights during the decade of the 1830s. He represented Providence at the 1830 National Colored Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison hired Niger to be an agent for the *Liberator* in Rhode Island. In Providence, Niger also served as an agent for *Freedom’s Journal*. Niger joined the New England Anti-Slavery Society and served as a Providence delegate; in 1836, he became a founding member of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society. Niger became involved in the Black suffrage cause beginning January 6, 1831, with Providence African American community leaders George Waterman, James E. Ellis, George C. Willis, and George McCarty. Their concern was twofold: a fee per annum charged in taxes to African American property owners without the right to representation and the refusal of the City of Providence to build a public school for children of color; only taxes paid for white children’s public education. They drafted a petition, submitted it to the Rhode Island General Assembly, and debated on the floor, but nothing came to fruition. In January 1841, Alfred Niger and George McCarty submitted a similar petition on behalf of

fifteen other African American community leaders regarding the taxation issue, which met the same fate as it had in 1831 among assembly members.

In 1846, Niger served as a Providence delegate to the American Anti-Slavery Society. One of Niger's sons, Alexander Petion Niger, had a career in printing and became the first Black member of a typographical union in Providence when he was one of its founding members in 1857. For more biographical information and Niger's involvement in the Rhode Island Black community and the Dorr Rebellion, see CJ Martin, "The 'Mustard Seed': Providence's Alfred Niger, Antebellum Black Voting Rights Activist." *Small State, Big History*. Accessed May 2, 2024. <https://smallstatebighistory.com/the-mustard-seed-providences-alfred-niger-antebellum-black-voting-rights-activist/>

<sup>40</sup> Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 48–49.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>42</sup> Marvin E. Gettleman, *The Dorr Rebellion: A Study in American Radicalism: 1833–1849* (New York: Random House, 1973), 34–36.

<sup>43</sup> *Preamble and Constitution of the Rhode Island Suffrage Association: Adopted Friday Evening, March 27, 1840* (Providence: B.T. Albro, 1840), 11.

<sup>44</sup> Erik J. Chaput, *The People's Martyr: Thomas Wilson Dorr and His 1842 Rhode Island Rebellion* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 57; "Extension of Suffrage No.V: To the People of Providence," *Providence Daily Journal*, September 15, 1841.

<sup>45</sup> "Extension of Suffrage No.V: To the People of Providence," *Providence Daily Journal*, September 15, 1841.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> "People of Color—their right to vote," *Providence Daily Journal*, September 17, 1841.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Lemons, J. Stanley, and Michael McKenna, "Re-enfranchisement of Rhode Island Negroes." *Rhode Island History* 30 (Winter, 1971): 8.

<sup>51</sup> "Meeting of the Suffrage Association," *Providence Daily Journal*, September 27, 1841.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> "Suffrage Convention: Friday Evening," *Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

<sup>54</sup> "To the Free Suffrage Convention," excerpted in Edmund Burke, *Rhode Island—Interference of the Executive in the Affairs of June 7, 1844: Burke's Report* (Washington: Blair & Rives, print., 1844), 111.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> “Swamp Yankee” is a slang word applied to southern New England white Anglo Saxons or “native” southern New Englanders who have lived in the region since the seventeenth century. For more information, please see Alan Rosenberg, “Is Swamp Yankee an Insult or a Badge of Honor?” *Providence Journal*, February 29, 2008.

<sup>57</sup> John H. Bracey, *Free Blacks in America, 1800–1860* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1971), 86–87.

<sup>58</sup> “To the Free Suffrage Convention,” excerpted in Burke, *Burke’s Report*, 111.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 113; *Providence Directory, 1841*, 184–186. The following men were all Black activists who continued to fight for civil rights: Ichabod Northrup argued for school integration in 1859 before the Providence City Council and School Committee; Samuel Rodman owned \$400 worth of property by 1860 and became a doctor in the community; James Hazard, described as the “richest colored man in the city” joined the ranks of the state militia to thwart the Dorr Rebellion; George J. Smith was a founding member of the African Union Meeting House, the first school, church, and organizational center of the Providence Black community in 1821; and Ransom Parker, who by 1859, owned \$1800 worth of real estate and fought for the desegregation of schools in 1859 by signing the petition “To the Friends of Equal Rights in Rhode Island” presented to the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1859. See Robert J. Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees: Providence’s Black Community in the Antebellum Era* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 100, 128–129, 76, 58, 99.

<sup>61</sup> “Suffrage Convention, Friday Evening,” *Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841; *New Age and Constitutional Advocate*, October 22, 1841; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, October 21, 1841.

<sup>62</sup> *Constitution of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, as Finally Adopted by the Convention of the People Assembled at Providence, on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of November, 1841* (Providence: Printed at the New Age Office, 1842), 6.

<sup>63</sup> “Suffrage Convention Caucus,” *Providence Daily Journal*, October 9, 1841.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> “Suffrage Convention: Friday Evening,” *Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*; *New Age and Constitutional Advocate*, October 22, 1841; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, October 21, 1841.

<sup>74</sup> Rhode Island. General Assembly, Committee On Action Of General Assembly On Constitution, Richard Kidder Randolph, 1842 Rhode Island, General Assembly, and Rhode Island, *Report of the Committee on the Action of the General Assembly, on the subject of the Constitution* [Providence: s.n, 1842] Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/10017224/>, 11.

<sup>75</sup> “To the People of Providence. Address of the Free Suffrage Convention. Extension of Suffrage. No.XVI,” *Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

<sup>76</sup> Burke, *Burke’s Report*, 113.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted from the *Suffrage Examiner* and excerpted in: Burke, *Burke’s Report*, 114; “Annual Meeting,” *Suffrage Examiner*, December 1841, Brown University, Sidney S. Rider Collection on Rhode Island History, John Hay Library, Providence, RI.

<sup>78</sup> Frederick Douglass remarked in his memoir: “Her [Abby] youth and simple Quaker beauty, combined with her wonderful earnestness, her large knowledge and great logical power, bore down all opposition in the end.” Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 274.

<sup>79</sup> CJ Martin, “The ‘Mustard Seed’: Providence’s Alfred Nizer, Antebellum Black Voting Rights Activist.”

<sup>80</sup> Burke, *Burke’s Report*, 115.

<sup>81</sup> *Providence Daily Journal*, December 29, 1841.

<sup>82</sup> “Anti Slavery Meeting,” *Providence Daily Journal*, December 13, 1841.

<sup>83</sup> “Be Not Alarmed,” *Providence Daily Journal*, December 29, 1841.

<sup>84</sup> “Questions to be answered,” *Providence Daily Journal*, December 30, 1841.

<sup>85</sup> Mowry, *The Dorr War*, 136–138.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 136–138.

<sup>87</sup> “The Duty of All Citizens,” *Providence Daily Journal*, June 1, 1842.

<sup>88</sup> Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 102.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 102–103.

<sup>90</sup> *Emancipator and Free American*, June 5, 1842.

<sup>91</sup> *Providence Daily Journal*, June 26, 1842.

<sup>92</sup> McDougall, Frances Harriet Whipple Green, *Might and Right; By a Rhode Islander* (Providence: A.H. Stillwell, 1844), 294.

<sup>93</sup> Excerpted in: *Providence Daily Journal*, July 12, 1842.

<sup>94</sup> “The Celebration,” *Providence Daily Journal*, July 6, 1842.

<sup>95</sup> Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 96.

<sup>96</sup> “The Conventions,” *Providence Daily Journal*, September 20, 1842.

<sup>97</sup> CJ Martin, “The ‘Mustard Seed’: Providence’s Alfred Niger, Antebellum Black Voting Rights Activist.”

<sup>98</sup> *Journal of the Convention Assembled to Frame a Constitution for the State of Rhode Island, at Newport, September 12, 1842: Printed by order of the House of Representatives, at its January Session, 1859* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., State Printers, 1859), 35–36.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–48.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 67–68.

<sup>101</sup> “Proposed Constitution of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 7, 1842.

<sup>102</sup> Thomas A. Jenckes, “State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations: In Convention, November 5, A.D. 1842,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 7, 1842.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> At least 700 eligible Black men could vote in Rhode Island. This aggregate helped tip the amendment to extend Black male suffrage in their favor. Also, many eligible voting Dorrites refused to participate in the elections, which helped significantly. For more information, see Gettleman, *Dorr Rebellion*, 145, 148.

<sup>105</sup> “Who Have the Right to Vote on: The Adoption of the Constitution,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 14, 1842.

<sup>106</sup> “The Proposed Constitution: Compared with the Constitution of other States,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 18, 1842.

<sup>107</sup> “The Vote on the Constitution,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 22, 1842.

<sup>108</sup> “For the Journal,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 22, 1842.

<sup>109</sup> Pen names were often used in articles published in the *Providence Daily Journal*. A stylistic choice of editorial writing during the nineteenth century, names such as “A Friend of Equal Rights,” “A Citizen,” and “Equality” reflect the author’s allegiance to African American male suffrage and equality. The pen name “No: No: No!,” for obvious reasons, called for voters to write “no” in their voting ballots for an amendment that included the word “white” as a voting clause in the Law and Order Constitution.

<sup>110</sup> “Vote on the Constitution,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 23, 1842.

<sup>111</sup> “Vote on the Constitution,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 26, 1842.

<sup>112</sup> *Providence Daily Journal*, November 29, 1842; votes from Richmond and Hopkinton added to the original aggregate of 3,793 for and 1320 against the “Admittance of Blacks” as cited in “Vote on the Constitution,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 26, 1842.

<sup>113</sup> Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 102.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>115</sup> McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History*, 133.

<sup>116</sup> James M. McPherson and James K. Hogue, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 90–92.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 93–94.

<sup>118</sup> McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History*, 124.

<sup>119</sup> “Increase of Catholicism in the United States,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 18, 1842.

<sup>120</sup> Elisha R. Potter, to John Brown Francis, July 22, 1842, Francis Family Papers Collection, Rhode Island Historical Society Library (RIHSL), Providence, RI.

<sup>121</sup> McPherson and Hogue, *Ordeal by Fire*, 135.

<sup>122</sup> Quoted from the *Suffrage Examiner* and excerpted in *Burke’s Report*, 114.

<sup>123</sup> McDougall, *Might and Right*, 291.

<sup>124</sup> “Fugitive Slaves,” *Providence Daily Journal*, March 2, 1842.

<sup>125</sup> Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 114–115; *Report Upon the Census of Rhode Island, 1865; with the Statistics of the Population, Agriculture, Fisheries, and Manufactures of the States*, xlv.

<sup>126</sup> “Population of the United States,” *Providence Daily Journal*, July 1, 1841; *Report Upon the Census of Rhode Island, 1865; with the Statistics of the Population, Agriculture, Fisheries, and Manufactures of the States*, xlv–xlvi; the African American population in Rhode Island shrank nearly a percentage point between 1830–1840 in comparison of the proportion of the total population of the state.

<sup>127</sup> Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 77–79.

<sup>128</sup> “The Doings of the Convention,” *Providence Daily Journal*, September 20, 1842.

<sup>129</sup> Quoted in Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 35.



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